DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 330 014 CS 507 416

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TITLE Debate and Critical Thinking.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Communication Association (Chicago, IL, April 11-14, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Skills; *Critical Thinking; *Debate; Higher Education; Inferences; *Judges; Logical Thinking; *Persuasive Discourse; Public Speaking; Secondary Education; Student Evaluation; *Thinking Skills
IDENTIFIERS Debate Theory; Evidence

ABSTRACT

Although academic debate is not viewed highly by many in the critical thinking movement, most of the attacks are based on a misperception of the activity, while others target faults that are not inherent to the activity. Contrary to the claim that debaters seek only to win, this desire is regulated by rules of evidence, time limits, rules governing what can be argued, and voluntary disclosure of arguments and evidence. In addition, the claim that winning is everything emphasizes the advocates in a debate instead of the judge, who forms a reasoned judgment based on the positions advocated. In regard to the claim that debaters rely on poor evidence, it should be noted that most cases in law are forced to rely on imperfect evidence, and debaters already attack the qualifications of evidence in debate. Teachers may supplement this with lectures on the relative strength of sources, and judges can reinforce this by placing more weight on sources of high quality. Finally, given the time limits in debate and the use of a neutral third party, the argument that debaters win through persistence, not merit, does not have much credibility. The use of trained judges, basing their decisions on reasoning, rebuts the argument that debate focuses on insincerity and flattery. Debate is an excellent way to train students to be critical thinkers. Rather than drawing a model of critical thinking from formal logic, the model should be drawn from freedom of speech, where truth emerges only through an adversarial system involving advocates and critics. (TD)

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Debate and Critical Thinking

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Two years ago I attended a conference at the University of Windsor on informal logic. At that conference, Richard Paul, one of the leaders of the critical thinking movement, attacked the teaching of debate as a tool of critical thinking, in large part because he had seen a very poor public debate on his campus. While wondering about the implications of a leading critical thinker condemning an entire field based upon a single example, I came across a textbook on display at the conference by another teacher of critical thinking. This scholar argued:

> The trouble with debates is that the participants so rarely seek the truth - each is seeking to win, and in attempting to win, it is all too easy to bend the truth. Furthermore, in a debate it is a mark of failure to concede that the other side is right.
>
> Another objection to debates is their bruising quality. We've probably all been shellacked by somebody whose only merit was to be more persistently obtuse than we were at driving home a point. Unless one suffers from sadomasochistic tendencies, therefore, it is best to avoid debates.[1]

This attack is not atypical. Woods and Walton, in their text, Argument: The Logic of the Fallacies argue:

> The first temptation of debate that we noted is sophistry. . . . The second temptation is insincerity; the third is flattery.[2]

Quine suggests:

> Debating teams are promoted in schools as a spur to effective language and insightful thought. They serve that purpose, but only by setting the goal of persuasion above the goal of truth. The debater's strength lies not in intellectual curiosity nor in amenability to rational persuasion by others, but in his skill in defending a preconception come what may. His is a nefarious knack of disregarding all discrepancies while regarding every crepancy. The same skill, along with legal lore, is the strength of the trial lawyer or barrister, and the strength also of the

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[1]Paper presented at the Central States Speech Association Convention, Chicago, Illinois, April 11-14, 1991.

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> successful politician, one or the other of which careers the captain of the debating team is clearly destined for. Happily there are lawyers who will take on only such cases as they deem to be just, and politicians who will espouse only a cause that is righteous; but these scruples are not adjuncts of the rhetorical pole, nor are they keys to success in the legal or political profession.[3]

Given these criticisms of academic debate, it is perhaps not surprising to find that Stanford University is seriously considering rejecting a million dollar endowment for its debate program on the grounds that it promotes anti-rational behavior.

Academic debate is not viewed very highly my many in the critical thinking movement (or, for that matter, by many of those outside of debate). These quotations illustrate some of the objections raised against debate. If the goal of argument is to discover the truth, then the popular view of academic debate would suggest that it is an inappropriate model for argument; debate is viewed by its critics as an unproductive means for discovering the truth. Debaters are seen as being sophists who will employ any means to win an argument. If these views are accurate, then debate, rather than being a method of teaching critical thinking, should be a method avoided by all critical thinkers; our role as responsible critical thinkers should be the steer students away from the evils of participation in debate.

Fortunately, I believe that most of the attacks made by scholars against debate are based on a misperception of the activity and others are not inherent to the activity. Despite this, responding to these attacks is useful both to suggest ways of defending the debate and activity and as a method of suggesting ways to improve the activity to assist it in further promoting critical thinking. Consider some of the most frequently voiced objections to debate:

<u>Debaters seek only to win</u>. It is true that debaters may be motivated in part, or maybe to a large degree to winning debate. It is probably also true that students in critical thinking classes are there to "win" a high grade or for other equally 'irrational' reasons. That does not deny that students in informal logic or critical thinking classes may learn something about critical thinking despite their motivation for being in class. Similarly, debaters may learn about reasoning and critical thinking even if their motivation for learning those skills may be to win.

If the attack is that in a specific debate, debaters will hold on to a single position in an attempt to win a debate, the attack still represents a misinterpretation of academic debate.[4] Initially, a similar attack can be made against the dialectic.

Woods and Walton, for example, argue that:

> If you and I are engaged in persuasion dialogue, my goal is to persuade you of my thesis. And hence my obligation should be to prove that thesis from premises that you accept or are committed to. Your obligation is to prove your thesis from premises I accept or am committed to.[5]

This approach could easily lead to the abuses made against academic debate.

In addition, the claim that debate focuses on the goal of winning emphasizes the advocates in a debate instead of the judge. The judge views advocates advancing views and forms a reasoned judgment based on the positions advocated. Even if debaters never judge a round, the best debaters begin to view the round from the perspective of the judge. The effectiveness of this method has been demonstrated through numerous studies of the legal adversarial system.[6] (I have always wondered when, if Stanford's attack on the adversarial nature of academic debate is correct, Stanford plans to eliminate its law school which presumably is teaching the same undesirable characteristics taught in academic debate). In addition, the desire to win is regulated by rules of evidence, time limits, rules governing what can be argued in individual speeches, voluntary disclosure of arguments and evidence, and other norms of the activity.[7] One thing we can do as educators is to strengthen this ethic; that even though debate is competitive, it has a cooperative side as debaters help other team members, share evidence and arguments with other squads, and to be courteous toward opponents and judges. The works by Johnstone[8] and Brockreide[9] may be useful in promoting an appropriate view of argument by focusing on the attitudes that debaters should take towards argument and toward their opponents. Johnstone, for example, notes that to engage in argument always entails a risk of being proven wrong. Brockreide's view of arguers as lovers, suggests that debaters should respect their opponents.

<u>Debaters rely on poor evidence</u>. Woods and Walton expand on their criticism of debate by focusing of debate in a legal setting. Their main attack argues that legal advocates rely heavily on eyewitness testimony. This attack has been considered by the courts, and rejected for a number of reasons:

> It is improbable that such miscarriages of justice are a common outcome in criminal prosecutions. Only about ten percent of cases nationwide go to trial, and in most of those the identity of the perpetrator is not in issue. It is estimated that eyewitness evidence is used in only five percent of criminal trials. Even when identity is contested, most are not "pure identification" cases that rest solely on eyewitness testimony. It is no coincidence

> that in all of the identification cases decided by the Supreme Court there has been ample circumstantial evidence or other evidence to connect the defendant with the crime, apart from the identification testimony.[10]

In addition, it is unclear how eyewitness testimony can be avoided in some arguments; the defendant is hardly likely to confess in these cases, and we are forced to rely on imperfect evidence in order to reach a conclusion. To omit such evidence does not improve the decisionmaking process.

Academic debate might further improve its utility in teaching critical thinking by paying more attention to the role of evidence and evidence quality in debate. Debaters already attack the qualifications of evidence in debate; teachers may wish to supplement this with lectures on the relative strength of sources of evidence and judges can reinforce this by placing more weight on sources of high quality.

I would note, however, that the attack on the use of evidence in academic debate made by those familiar with the activity often simplifies the learning process. Even if, in debates, debaters do not distinguish between good sources and bad sources, outside of the debate round they know what sources are more reliable. In many cases they have read widely on the topic and can tell what sources are liberal, conservative, or neutral. They know which sources are more reliable. Even if one cannot tell this from watching a debate round, it can be easily discovered by talking to debaters outside of a debate round.

<u>Debaters win through persistence, not merit</u>. Missimer's attack on debate is that debaters often win through persistence, not through stronger arguments. Given the time limits in debate and the use of a neutral third party, this attack does not have much credibility. In addition, it is equally possible that the person being intimidated is wrong, and simply refuses to listen to arguments against his or her position. In debate, we teach students to select the strongest arguments, to make choices about what arguments to extend (encouraging them to drop weak arguments), and judges give debaters feedback on what arguments have merit. Most debaters eventually learn to accept defeat and to improve their arguments based on that feedback.

<u>Debate focuses on insincerity and flattery</u>. This attack is interesting, since it does have implications on the evaluation of debates. In political debates, it may be true that sophistry may win out over rational reasoning. That may be a reason, however, to use trained judges in debate rounds that will base their decisions on reasoning, not on irrational appeals. In fact, this has been the trend in recent history. It may be true that, even with this trend, there are judges that are persuaded by irrational appeals, but that is just as likely in other classroom

settings where extended arguments are evaluated. Debate, however, has two advantages over the process of having an individual teacher reading an essay. First, debate involves the comparison of arguments, rather than an arbitrary judgement by one individual. If a teacher thinks an argument is irrational, the student has little chance to defend his/her argument. In debate, the student has the opportunity to defend his or her attacks against an opponent rather than being forced to defend a position against unanticipated attacks.

Second, the activity imposes a number of checks on the judge. In elimination rounds other judges see how a judge justifies a decision. Judges' ballots are read by other critics. There are relatively stable standards for evaluating debates. All of these factors make the evaluation process in debate much more objective than any other method of evaluating an extended argument.

Debate as Promoting Critical Thinking

Robert Ennis, one of the leading advocates of critical thinking, has argued that a critical thinker has a number of characteristics. A critical thinker should:

1. Seek a clear statement of the thesis or question.
2. Seek reasons
3. Try to be well informed.
4. Use credible sources and mention them.
5. Take into account the total situation.
6. Try to remain relevant to the main point.
7. Keep in mind the original or basic concern.
8. Look for alternatives
9. Be open-minded
   a. Consider seriously other points of view than one's own ("dialogical thinking")
   b. Reason from premises with which one disagrees--without letting the disagreement interfere with one's own reasoning ("suppositional thinking")
   c. Withhold judgment when the evidence and reasons are insufficient
10. Take a position (and change a position) when the evidence and reasons are sufficient to do so.
11. Seek as much precision as the subject permits.
12. Deal in an orderly manner with the parts of a complex whole.
13. Be sensitive to the feelings, levels of knowledge, and degree of sophistication of others.[11]

A casual glance at these characteristics of a critical thinker would reveal that debate is an excellent way to train students as a critical thinker. Topicality arguments and arguments over criteria force debaters to clarify the focus of

the dispute. There is no activity that better trains students in research techniques than academic debate. Brainstorming cases and developing counterplans focuses debater's attention on alternative solutions.

The only two characteristics of a critical thinker not promoted by debate might be characteristics 9 and 10. These characteristics, however, assume critical thinking is a solitary act by an individual. In fact, critical thinking is a social activity; in order to reach a conclusion, it is not enough for an individual to hide in a room and think critically; rather to examine a problem involves interacting with others, advancing arguments, hearing attacks, modifying the initial position, and so on. In my view, rather than drawing a model of critical thinking from formal logic, the best model is one drawn from freedom of speech where truth emerges only through an adversarial system involving advocates and critics. This requires that all positions be defended strongly, even incorrect ones. Truth emerges from the system, not from any one individual in the system. To attack the debate system by suggesting that one person in the system may not be objective misinterprets the system since that individual may be part of a larger system that may counteract any individual action:

> In response to Boswell's question: "But what do you think of supporting a cause which you know to be bad?' Dr. Johnson replied: "Sir, you do not know it to be good or bad till the judge determines it." Similarly, Baron Bramwell wrote: "A man's rights are to be determined by the Court, not by his attorney or Counsel. It is for the want of remembering this that foolish people object to lawyers that they will advocate a case against their own opinions. A client is entitled to say to his Counsel, 'I want your advocacy, not your judgment; I prefer that of the Court.'" And Dr. Johnson again: "A lawyer has no business with the justice or injustice of the cause which he undertakes, unless the client asks his opinion, and then he is bound to give it honestly. The justice or injustice of the cause is to be decided by the Judge . . . . A lawyer is not to tell what he knows to be a lie; he is not to produce what he knows to be a false deed; but he is not to usurp the providence of the jury and of the Judge and determine what shall be the effect of evidence. . . . If lawyers were to undertake no causes till they were sure they were just, a man might be precluded altogether from a trial of his claim, though, were it judicially examined, it might be found a very just claim."[12]

I have often thought of writing a paper called, "can critical thinking occur without a library?" concluding that the answer is no. To reach a conclusion it is important to be able to locate and digest large quantities of evidence; critical

thinking should be viewed as a social activity, not a solitary one.

There is a related debate in the field of both argument and critical thinking. Toulmin has posited the concept of argument fields[13] and McPeck has raised the question of whether critical thinking can be taught independent of content.[14] If McPeck is true, the immersion of debaters into a specific field is a much more promising approach to critical thinking than an approach that assumes that most rules of reasoning are field-invariant. I fear, however, that both views are incorrect; I believe that each argument creates its own field. That rules operate as strings connecting types of argument together, but that each individual argument consists of a unique intersection of these strings. The introduction of generic arguments into debate illustrates this view, and it also explains something about the nature of these strings; that they change slightly from one argument to another, while keeping some common features.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to examine a few of the attacks made by individuals involved in critical thinking on the academic debate activity. Many of these attacks suggest that those in critical thinking have not been exposed to the concept of inherency: to say that current academic debate has a certain trait does not mean that it inherently must share that feature. Many of the attacks merely suggest weaknesses or problems that we as educators can address in teaching debaters. Rather than rejecting debate, however, these attacks suggest that we should work to improve debate.

I continue to believe that academic debate is one of the most educationally beneficial aspects of academia, and the material on critical thinking only demonstrates more potential benefits of academic debate.

Notes

1.C.A. Missimer, Good Arguments: An Introduction to Critical Thinking (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1988), p. 156.

2.John Woods and Douglas Walton, Argument: The Logic of the Fallacies (New York: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1982), P. 19.

3.W. V. Quine, Quiddities (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 183.

4.A similar criticism can be made against some critical thinkers. See Richard Paul, "Teaching Critical Thinking in the 'Strong' Sense: A Focus on Self-Deception, World-Views and Dialectical Mode of Analysis," Informal Logic Newsletter, May, 1982, pp. 2-7.

5.Douglas Walton, Informal Logic: A Handbook for Critical Argumentation (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 5.

6.See Stephan Landsman, The Adversary System: A Description and Defense (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1984); and Benjamin Kaplan, "Civil Procedure - Reflections on the Comparison of Systems," Buffalo Law Review, 9 (1960): 409.

7.See Judith L. Maute, "Sporting Theory of Justice: Taming Adversarial Zeal with a Logical Sanctions Doctrine," Connecticut Law Review, 20 (Fall, 1987): 7-93.; Stephan Landsman, "The Decline of the Adversary System and the Changing Role of the Advocate in that System," San Diego Law Review, 18 (March, 1981): 251-261; Stuart L. Smith, "Science in the Courtroom: the Value of an Adversarial System," Alternatives, 15 (April/May, 1988): 18; and Stephan Landsman, The Adversary System: A Description and Defense, (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1984).

8.Henry W. Johnstone, "Some Reflections on Argumentation," in Philosophy, Rhetoric and Argumentation, edited by Maurice Natanson and Henry W. Johnstone, Jr. (College Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965).

9.Wayne Brockreide, "Arguers as Lovers," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 5 (1972): 1-11; and Douglas Ehninger and Wayne Brockreide, Decision by Debate, second edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

10.Wallace D. Loh, "Psychological Research: Past and Present," Michigan Law Review, 79 (March 1981), p. 686.

11.Robert H. Ennis, 1985. "Goals for a Critical Thinking Curriculum." in Arthur L. Costa, Ed. Developing Minds: A Resource Book for Thinking Teaching. Alexandria, VA.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, p. 54.

12.Monroe H. Freedman, Lawyer's Ethics in an Adversary System (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), p. 51.

13.See Stephen Toulmin, Uses of Argument (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

14.J. E. McPeck, Critical Thinking and Education. (New York: St. Martins Press, 1981).